

A QUIET WEDDING

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On Thursday afternoon, in the front office of the Coliseum at Prairie City, Iowa, Bill Bozeman, three-hundred pound black-bearded professional wrestler, was conferring with his manager, a buxom and highly efficient young woman by the name of Miss Bella Jones, who a few years previously had abandoned her career as a circus bareback rider to devote her peculiar talents to the commercial side of the professional wrestling game. Bill and Bella were discussing their approaching marriage.

"What I want," Bill said, "is just a simple, quiet wedding."

"What you're going to have," Bella said, "is an elaborate, noisy brawl—with plenty of vulgar excitement, and as big a mob as we can drag in. It's a wonderful chance to put over a lot of swell publicity."

"Maybe so," Bill said. "And I don't mind publicity about my wrestling. But when we're getting married, I figure it is our own personal business. So what we want is just a nice quiet—"

"Listen," said Bella. "Before you took me on as your manager you were just a ham. Now you're the best box-office attraction in the Middle West. And what did it? Publicity!"

"Not entirely," Bill said. "Don't forget that I'm a pretty good wrestler."

"I know it. But it isn't straight wrestling that brings in the cash customers. You've built yourself up as a swell drawing card by following my advice and giving the fans a good show—wearing those whiskers and billing yourself as the Bearded Behemoth, roaring and snarling and tearing around the ring like a drunken gorilla, and pulling off stunts like that fight out in the street last week and so on."

"Well," Bill said, "I still got my beard. I can still roar when I'm in the ring. And if you want, I could stage another street fight."

"No," Bella said. "That's old stuff now. We got to give them something new. And this wedding is just the chance we need. So I've figured out a setup that will just naturally drive the fans crazy."

"And just what are you planning to do?" asked Bill, suspiciously.

"I'm announcing that I can't make up my mind whether to marry you or Clarence Alford. So it's going to be decided by the wrestling match next Saturday night. Whichever one of you wins gets me as a prize."

"What! You mean you'd actually consider marrying that low-down, chicken-livered ex-acrobat, Clarence Alford?"

"Certainly not," snorted Bella. "I'm working out the scenario for the bout so Clarence will almost get you, but you'll flatten him in the end."

"We don't need any scenario for that," said Bill, indignantly.¹ "I can flatten that rat any time I feel like it."

"All right," said Bella. "So after you've won the bout, we'll have the wedding right there in the ring. I'm going to have a full brass band—"

"I won't stand for it," said Bill.

"You've got to," said Bella. "It is all decided. And here's the advance publicity." She flashed a copy of the *Prairie City Evening Times*. With growing indignation Bill read the following item:

**GRUNT AND GROAN BOYS EMULATE KNIGHTS OF OLD
—JOUST FOR HAND OF FAIR LADY**

"Just as the plumed knights of yore were wont to engage in deadly combat for the hand of some fair lady, so two mighty gladiators of today, Clarence Alford, the Akron (Ohio) Adonis, and Bill Bozeman, the Bearded Behemoth, will clash in a bitterly contested wrestling bout on Saturday evening at the local Coliseum to decide which is to win the hand in marriage of Miss Bella Jones, beautiful and attractive local business girl.

"When interviewed this afternoon, Miss Jones expressed her warm regard for the Akron Adonis, who is renowned from coast to coast for his beautifully developed body, for his clean sportsmanship, and for his gentlemanly tactics in the ring. On the other hand, Miss Jones admitted that she is deeply fascinated by the sheer brute power, and the animal cruelty of the hideously hairy Bearded Behemoth. Unable to choose between the curiously

¹ indignantly: angrily

contrasting charms of these two ardent suitors,² she says she has decided to stake her entire future on the outcome of the wrestling match to be held next Saturday night.

"The exact motives underlying Miss Jones's strange decision are the subject of considerable discussion by local psychologists. It is possible that she may be honestly and sincerely bewildered when she attempts to evaluate the relative charms of her two manly lovers, and that she has hit upon this wrestling match as the only possible means of solving the dilemma which tears her now this way, now that. On the other hand there are many who charge that she is actuated³ by overweening pride and selfish vanity—by a neurotic craving for the thrill that will come when she witnesses this epic battle, and realizes that these mighty men are fighting for her, and her alone.

"In any event, the general delectability and oomph possessed by the prize are sure to inspire a battle of unprecedented and blood-curdling ferocity. The customers are certain to get their money's worth."

As Bill finished reading, Bella smiled proudly. "What do you think of it?" she asked.

"It's a bunch of tripe,"⁴ said Bill. "I don't see how these sporting writers can produce such stuff."

"They can't," said Bella. "They haven't the ability. I wrote the whole thing myself."

"I still say it's tripe," said Bill. "And I bet Sammy Ringo will agree with me." Sammy Ringo was the owner of the Coliseum and producer of the wrestling bouts.

"I explained the whole thing to Sammy yesterday," said Bella. "He thought it was swell. He told me to go ahead. And he's the boss around here, so what he says goes. You know that."

"Just the same, I don't like it, and I won't stand for it. Have you told Clarence yet?"

"Yes."

"What did he say?"

"Oh, he had a lot of childish objections. He said in the first place he didn't like me, and in the second place he had a wife already, so he couldn't pretend he wanted to marry me."

2 **suitors:** men who seek to marry a woman

3 **actuated:** moved

4 **tripe:** something worthless or offensive

"And what did you say to that?"

"I told him I wouldn't marry him for a million dollars because I like him even less than he doesn't like me—and he doesn't have to worry about his wife, because he hasn't lived with her for years, and she is way back east in Newark, New Jersey, or some such place, where she won't even hear about this business. And, finally, I told him it was all according to orders from Sammy Ringo himself, so Clarence had to agree—just the way you're going to agree."

"I'll never agree," said Bill. "What I want is just a nice quiet—"

"I'm sorry," interrupted Bella, "but I got no time to argue. I got to go and work up some more publicity."

The next day—Friday—the local paper carried another article playing up the coming wrestling bout and wedding. There was also a letter to the editor, as follows:

"TO THE EDITOR OF THE *TIMES*. Sir:—For some time past the more thoughtful members of the community have viewed with alarm the increasing wave of indecency and loose-living which seems to be sweeping across this country. Those of us who wish to preserve the sanctity of the American home and the purity of American womanhood have stood aghast at the inroads being made by the forces of communism, nazism, atheism, companionship marriage, free love, Trojan horses, easy divorce, birth control, selfishness, greed, irreverence, the liquor traffic, gambling, and the so-called freedom of the younger generation. But the climax of all these iniquitous⁵ movements is reached in the shocking performance announced in today's paper. I refer to the so-called wrestling match which is planned for Saturday night at the Coliseum, where, according to your paper, some shameless hussy—I will not dignify her by the name of woman—is brazenly⁶ offering her body as a prize to the victor of a brutal and degrading physical combat. In the name of common decency I call upon you, Mr. Editor, to exclude from your columns all further publicity and advertising for this affair, and, in the name of the law, I call upon the police of Prairie City to stop this degenerate spectacle. (Signed) Outraged Womanhood."

Bill showed the letter to Bella.

"This shows," he said, "what we're getting into by exploiting ourselves this way. I don't like it. I won't stand for people calling you a—what was

5 **iniquitous**: wicked

6 **brazenly**: with disrespect

it, now?" He looked over the letter again. "Oh, here it is—a shameless hussy."

"It's all good publicity, Bill. If we can sell the public the idea that this is an immoral exhibition, we're sure to pack the house. That's why I wrote the letter."

"You mean you wrote it?"

"Sure—and the sporting editor was kind enough to see that it got published. Hot stuff, isn't it?"

"Bella, I'm ashamed of you."

"I'm not," said Bella. "But now I have a lot of other things to do. Good-bye." And Bella was gone.

On Saturday afternoon, the papers came out with more publicity, more objections, and an item stating that a member of the State Athletic Commission had decided to attend the bout in person. The Commissioner was quoted as saying that he stood—first, last and all the time—for good, clean sport. And there had been so much publicity and controversy about the coming bout, that he felt it his duty to make sure that everything was on the level and in accordance with the high moral standards heretofore always associated with the manly art of wrestling throughout the state.

Bill was considerably worried at the prospect of having the Athletic Commissioner at the bout. But Bella merely laughed: "All you have to do is follow my advice, and everything will be all right."

"I'm not so sure," said Bill.

"You're not losing your faith in me, are you?" asked Bella. "Don't you love me anymore?"

"Bella," said Bill, "you are the most wonderful woman in the world. You know I'm just crazy about you. Without you to handle things for me, I never would have amounted to anything. But this time I wish you would listen to me. It would be so much nicer to have just a simple quiet—"

"Bill," said Bella, "you're just too sweet for words, and I love you very much, and I just know you're going to carry this thing through the way I want you to."

"Well," said Bill, doubtfully. "If you insist—"

"Atta boy!" said Bella. She kissed him affectionately on his cheek just above the point where his beard began. "And now," she went on, briskly, "we've got to go down and see Clarence, and make the final arrangements."

Taking Bill by the hand, she led him down to the small Coliseum gymnasium, where Clarence Alford had just finished his afternoon workout. The term "Akron Adonis" fitted him fairly well. His face was rather weak and uninspiring, but his physical development was pretty much all right—broad shoulders, rippling muscles, and an undeniably graceful carriage. Bella motioned to Clarence. The three of them sat down on a bench, and Bella explained the details of the coming match.

"For the first ten or fifteen minutes," she said, "you guys can slam each other around in the usual way. But this is a very special occasion, so we ought to give the fans something new in the way of a finish. Here is the scenario: Clarence pulls a few flying tackles, maybe a couple of those phony flying handsprings, and Bill begins to act groggy. Then Clarence knocks Bill through the ropes, and Bill falls down in front of the first row of fans, and rolls in under the edge of the platform. Clarence stands looking down at the place where Bill disappeared and waiting for him to come back."

"There's nothing new about that," Clarence objected.

"Wait till you hear the rest," Bella said. "Instead of coming up where he went down, Bill creeps along under the platform and comes up into the ring on the far side. Clarence doesn't see him, because he has his back turned, and he's looking for him at the place where he disappeared. So Bill takes Clarence by surprise, slams him on the canvas, and wins the match. If you ask me, it's a good trick. The fans ought to eat it up."

"Yes, I guess it ought to work out all right," Bill admitted.

"But you want to be very careful, Bill," said Clarence, "when you hit me from behind. If you aren't careful you might hurt me."

"Don't you worry," Bill said. "I'll lay you down as gentle as if you were a crate of eggs."

"All right, then," Bella said. "It's settled. Now I have to go see about my wedding dress."

That was the last they saw of her until the evening performance.

When the doors were opened, there were already long lines of people waiting in the street. Sammy had boosted the prices, and the fans did a lot of grumbling, but they turned out just the same.

The last preliminary bout was over at half-past nine. The announcer then stepped up into the ring and explained that the grand entrance of the wedding party was about to take place. Afterward, the final bout would go on, and then the beautiful Miss Bella Jones would marry the winner.

As the announcer finished speaking, an orchestra arrived from the basement by means of the small stairway under the ring. The musicians climbed through the ropes, settled themselves on camp chairs, and started in on the well-known strains of *Oh Promise Me*. The words were sung by the announcer—amplified to a terrific roar by the public address system.

The fans, on the whole, did not like it. The lads in the cheap seats started a rhythmic stamping which almost drowned out the music. And the song ended in such a chorus of hoots and hisses that the announcer decided to skip *I Love You Truly*.

The orchestra swung into the opening bars of the *Lohengrin Wedding March*. A deep hush fell over the audience, accompanied by a great craning of necks as the wedding procession entered a rear door and moved down the aisle.

In front were two little flower girls—daughters of one of the preliminary wrestlers. They carried baskets of roses which they scattered before them as they advanced. There was some undignified scrambling around by nearby members of the audience who could not refrain from grabbing these roses as souvenirs. After the flower girls were six bridesmaids hired by a leading department store to model its latest gowns.

And then came Bella herself, a truly majestic figure in white satin, with a long veil. She leaned gracefully on the arm of Mr. Sammy Ringo, the promoter, who was beautifully dressed in full evening attire—including a white tie, white stiff shirt with large diamond studs, white satin vest, a coat with tails. Behind Bella were two little pages, sons of another wrestler, who carried her train.

The entire bridal party clambered into the ring, joined by the minister and the two bridegrooms, who came up from the basement. The timid-looking minister wore a dingy frock coat. The two bridegrooms were attired in wrestling trunks and bathrobes. Each was accompanied by a combination best man and second, clad in white pants and white sweater, and carrying a towel. The crowd burst into loud and enthusiastic applause. The announcer introduced the minister, the blushing bride, and the unhappy-looking bridegrooms. Then the orchestra disappeared into the basement. And the entire bridal party, with the exception of the two bridegrooms, climbed down into a section of the ringside seats which had been blocked off by white ribbon. Here also sat the Athletic Commissioner of the State.

The referee held his inevitable conference with the wrestlers. They removed their bathrobes, the big bell rang, and the great battle for the beautiful lady began.

Bill employed all his usual tricks for exciting the interest of the crowd. He expanded his vast hairy chest and beat upon it with his fists. He rumbled his hair and beard. He bared his teeth and growled and roared. And he went charging about the ring in his usual mad-bull fashion. Clarence employed the same Toreador⁷ tactics which he had used in the past—gracefully side-stepping Bill's wild rushes, wiggling out of tight places, and occasionally closing in and taking a good pull at the heavy black beard of his opponent. From time to time the two men would grapple with each other and fall heavily. Bill would get an apparently effective hold and almost push Clarence's shoulders to the mat. And then, with a mighty heave, Clarence would wiggle loose and escape. It was a good show, and it had the fans roaring with delight.

Finally Clarence caught Bill off his guard and bounded off the ropes with a beautiful flying tackle that sent Bill sprawling. As Bill staggered to his feet, Clarence floored him with another tackle. Then Clarence pulled his most spectacular stunt—the flying handspring—striking Bill square in the chest with his feet, and knocking him backward into the ropes. As Bill dropped heavily over the edge and rolled in under the platform, the crowd leaped to its feet in a frenzy of excitement. Clarence waited, tense and expectant, just inside the ropes.

Slowly the referee began to count. According to the rules, if Bill failed to get back into the ring in twenty seconds he would lose the match. When the referee had reached the count of ten, he began to slow down. By the time he got to fifteen he was proceeding at about half the normal speed. And at sixteen he stopped entirely and began to look around in a puzzled sort of way.

The State Athletic Commissioner was on his feet. "You keep on counting," he shouted. "I'm here to see that this is a fair match!"

Reluctantly the referee took up his slow count.

Bella slid out of her seat, got down on her knees and peered under the platform. In the semi-darkness she was able to make out the vast form of Bill, partly hidden by the complicated network of criss-cross timbers which supported the platform. He had reached a point directly under the center of the ring.

| ⁷ **Toreador:** bullfighter

"Hey, there," Bella shouted. "You better hurry."

"I am," Bill answered. "But I'm caught. I seem to be wedged in between two of these timbers."

Bella went scuttling in under the platform—bridal veil and all. She crawled around, put her shoulder behind Bill and pushed.

Bill heaved and struggled until the entire platform swayed and shook. Then one of the timbers came loose with a crash, and Bill was on his way once more, with Bella right after him.

But it was too late. By the time he emerged at the side of the ring, the referee had reached the count of twenty, and the State Athletic Commissioner was shouting, "All right, what are you waiting for? Hold up the hand of the winner!"

The referee walked over and lifted Clarence's hand high in the air. The crowd was cheering and clapping and stamping. The little minister—thinking, no doubt, of the generous fee of twenty-five dollars which Bella had promised him—climbed eagerly into the ring. He opened his prayer book.

Down on the main floor beside the ring Bella spoke rapidly into Bill's ear. "I can't back out of this very well myself," she said. "So there's only one thing to do."

"What's that?" asked Bill.

"You've got to kidnap me by violence. Come on—pick me up and carry me out of here! And don't mind if I put up a fight. I got to stage a bit of a show for the benefit of the fans."

After a few seconds hesitation, Bill went into action. With one sweep of his mighty arm he swung the far-from-unsubstantial⁸ form of his fiancée across his shoulders in a fireman's carry. But before he could start for the door he was diverted by a sudden commotion.

A large determined-looking woman came marching down the aisle. She reached the ring, climbed through the ropes, and walked over in front of Clarence.

"So this is what you are doing, you dirty little weasel!" she said in a shrill and angry voice. "Getting ready to commit bigamy⁹!"

"I can explain the whole thing," Clarence whined.

"I know all about it already," said the woman. "Apparently I was just in time. You can forget all about this new wedding, and from now on

⁸ **far-from-unsubstantial**: not small; large

⁹ **bigamy**: the act of marrying one person while still married to another

you're going to turn over all your spare cash to me, or I'll have you put in jail for non-support and desertion."

"Who are you?" asked the minister.

The lady pointed her finger at the cringing Clarence, and answered in a voice that came over the public address system like the roar of a Texas tornado: "I am this man's lawful wife!"

"Say," grunted Bella from her uncomfortable position across Bill's shoulders. "That's swell! It shows how far the publicity went; all the way to Newark, New Jersey. Now nobody can expect me to marry Clarence. So you can let me down, and you and I will get married according to the original plan."

"Bella," said Bill, "you got real brains. But I got the muscle."

"Put me down," yelled Bella.

"Shut up," said Bill. "I got you where I want you. And from now on I'm going to boss this affair."

He went up the aisle like a charging elephant. He carried the kicking and screaming Bella through the lobby, down to the dressing-rooms where he picked up his clothes, and out to the street where he hailed a passing taxi.

As they drove off, Bill braced himself for a terrific bawling out. But

Bella merely gazed at him with love and admiration. "What a man!"

she said. An hour later they were married by a minister in an out-lying village. It was a simple, quiet wedding. ~

